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Cassis Unveils S.A.V.E. the Children Early Learning Initiative

LANSING – State Sen. Nancy Cassis, joined by several of her Senate colleagues, today unveiled a landmark legislative package to prevent early learning failure and give students the skills they need to succeed both in school and in life.

The legislation will: ensure that students master basic skills to be successful in the classroom; encourage alliances between home, parents and school; and provide valuable training for teachers to implement prevention and intervention programs.

“As a state and as a society, it is important to support a robust, stable and expanding economy with a work force that can meet the challenges of our increasingly technological and knowledge-based economy,” said Cassis, a former teacher and school psychologist. “At this time, when education success is considered an absolute necessity for life success, this legislation will help ensure students get the best start to be successful in the classroom and in life.”

Specifically, the legislation will:

- (Cassis) – Establish an Early Intervention Grant Program. The bill calls for the use of \$1 million of the \$26 million allocated for small class sizes be used to develop up to 10 model sites and at least 40 sites of improvement. Only schools with a special education population greater than the state average would be considered. The legislation also allows small class size funding to be used for early intervention, in addition to the purposes for which it can already be used.
- (Cassis) – Increase the number of reading credits required to receive an elementary teacher certificate from six to nine and for a secondary certificate from three to six. The bill also requires teacher candidates to do field work as tutors in schools where the learning disabled population is greater than the state average. Also requires one-on-one early intervention training to be a part of the reading course work.
- (Birkholz) – Require any school district that has a special education rate greater than the state average to spend one of its five annually required professional development days on early intervention training.

- (Kuipers) – Require that 25 percent of a district’s AT-RISK funds be used for early intervention, if the school building or district has a learning disabled population greater than the state average and is not meeting AYP.
- (Jelinek) – Change the age requirement for beginning kindergarten. Currently students must be 5 years old by Dec. 1 to enroll in kindergarten. The legislation would change the law so that in the 2005-06 school year, a child may enroll in kindergarten if they are at least 5 by Nov 1, 2005. For 2006-07, a child may enroll if they are 5 by Oct. 1, 2006. For 2007-08, and each succeeding school year, a child may enroll if they are 5 by Sept. 1 of the school year of enrollment.
- (Hardiman) – Allows for further flexibility in the use of Durant funds in Section 11f.

“Our schools are burdened with a failure model for the identification of students who will receive special services,” Cassis said. “By offering interventions as soon as delays are noticed in the early years, instead of waiting for 4th grade testing, we can give students better results and save school districts the greater costs associated with special education placement for children without significant intrinsic learning handicaps.”

According to Cassis, a Novi Republican who is vice-chair of the Senate Education Committee, since the 1990-91 school year, the percentage of students statewide identified for special education has increased from 10.5 to 14.2 percent in 2003-04. In Northville, since implementing an early intervention program in 1992-93, the rate has decreased from 10.2 to 5.38 percent in 2004-05.

“We know who is at risk for learning failure and we know the indications of early learning success,” Cassis said. “We know that early learning success is inversely related to every adolescent risky behavior. We know that placing a child in a special education program increases the cost of education during the course of a student’s school career from \$70,000 to \$100,000. We know that there are easier, cheaper and more cost effective intervention programs.

“Now is the time to act on what we know. This legislation will give teachers and schools resources to make improvements, connect parents with schools, and save the children.”

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